

September 7, 2004

West Nile Virus Kills Twin Falls County Horse

A Twin Falls County horse that tested positive for West Nile virus (WNV) on Sept. 6 has been euthanized. The horse lived on a farm located near Filer and it is the first horse to test positive in the area. South Central District Health has been testing for mosquitoes at several locations around the district since June. Special traps are being set today at four sites across Gooding and Twin Falls counties, including the farm where the horse lived. Test results from the mosquito trapping will be available early next week.

The virus' path is moving steadily across southern Idaho. The Twin Falls County horse, which was fully vaccinated against West Nile virus, follows the discovery of a magpie in Gooding County that tested positive for WNV on Aug. 25. Although the horse was immunized, vaccination and reducing exposure to mosquitoes are still the best precautions for horse owners.

Other animals in Idaho have also tested positive for West Nile virus in recent weeks. A horse and bird in Elmore County died recently from West Nile virus and two Canyon County horses had positive WNV tests earlier this summer. It was also reported on Sept. 3 that an alpaca in Gem County tested positive for WNV and had been euthanized. According to Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist, 30 percent of horses infected with West Nile virus may die, but the virus does not affect most household pets.

"With West Nile virus present in our area," said Karin Frodin, RN, Epidemiologist for South Central District Health, "people need to take extra precautions to protect their families and themselves from being bitten by mosquitoes. Horse owners also need to be sure to vaccinate their horses against West Nile."

Frodin advises people to insect proof their homes and reduce standing water on their property that might provide breeding habitat for mosquitoes. Other tips include:

- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors.
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children.
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk.
- Empty birdbaths and clean decorative ponds every three to six days.
- Report dead birds such as crows, ravens, magpies, jays, or raptors to your local District Health or Fish and Game office.
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Most human infections of West Nile virus are mild or have no symptoms, and approximately 20 percent of those infected develop a generally mild fever that last from 3 to 6 days and begins from 3 to 14 days after infection. Symptoms often include: fever and headache, muscle aches, tiredness, nausea and vomiting, eye pain, skin rash, and enlarged lymph nodes. Less than one percent of people infected develop serious neurological disease. Those over age 50 are more susceptible to serious complications from the virus. People are encouraged to consult their health care provider if they have concerns about their health. Blood tests are available for those with symptoms, but two samples three weeks apart are needed for confirmation of West Nile virus.

There is no vaccine to protect humans against the virus. So far this year, there have been 1,174 human cases of West Nile virus in the United States and 29 deaths.

Idaho surveys mosquito populations for the virus, as well as tests dead magpies, crows, jays and raptors, such as red tail hawks, submitted through District Health departments. West Nile virus has a high mortality rate among these birds, and most states have discovered the virus in their states through dead bird testing. The virus is spread by migrating infected birds, which are bitten by mosquitoes. The infected mosquitoes can then pass the virus on to people and other animals. The flying range of mosquitoes is five to 10 miles.

South Central District Health, Idaho Fish and Game, and the Department of Health and Welfare have been supporting screening processes across the state for dead indicator birds and mosquitoes. State veterinarians have also been actively urging horse owners to fully vaccinate their horses against West Nile virus. The first year horses are vaccinated, they need an initial shot as well as a booster shot. South Central District Health has also been conducting weekly trapping of mosquitoes since June at four locations in the Magic and Wood River valleys, the Mini-Cassia area, and the Hagerman Valley, but no mosquito populations have tested positive so far this season.

For more information about the West Nile virus, please visit the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's West Nile virus web site at <http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>. Additional information can also be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm>